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SUBJECT: SPLM EL FASHER REPS GIVE MIXED VIEWS ON DARFUR REBEL
PROSPECTS

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY: In two separate conversations on March 30 and 31, El Fasher representatives of the Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM) gave mixed messages on prospects for unifying Darfur rebels in an as-yet undated second round of talks in Juba. One group, chaired by an Acting Secretary-General, was optimistic about the SPLM's ability to bring Sudan Liberation Army (SLA)/Abdulwahid and Justice and Equality Movement (JEM)/Khalil Ibrahim to the talks. The other representative, who currently serves as the Minister of Health of North Darfur, was more pessimistic about JEM participation in eventual Juba talks but optimistic about the ability of traditional Darfur leaders to unify Abdulwahid and SLA faction leader Abdulshafie under one SLA umbrella. Both groups of SPLM reps were reluctant to provide details about the Juba meeting but were nevertheless convinced about the SPLM's ability to bring about a tangible result from the rebels, whenever the talks may be. END SUMMARY.

SPLM TIGHT-LIPPED ABOUT DETAILS OF JUBA TALKS PART II

¶2. (SBU) In two separate conversations with FieldOff on March 30 and 31, El Fasher representatives of the SPLM acknowledged the advent of a second round of talks in Juba among Darfur rebel groups aimed at bridging differences remaining after the last round in fall 2007. Acting Secretary General Sayyed Abdullah Hussein mentioned SPLM plans to host a second meeting in Juba in the near future to continue rebel reunification efforts, adding that he had been in Juba March 15 to conduct outreach with rebel reps ahead of the upcoming talks. He said that SPLM Deputy Abdul Aziz Helou had been conducting similar SPLM shuttle diplomacy among the Darfur Peace Agreement (DPA) non-signatory movements to encourage them to participate (see septel of CDA Fernandez's meeting with Helou). He added that Abdul Aziz would be in El Fasher in the near future, along with Yassir Arman, who would come to Darfur "in ten days" to jumpstart SPLM's political activities in the region. Sayyed was optimistic that Abdul Aziz would win over even the "very moody" Abdulwahid, who, like JEM's Khalil, was reluctant to go to Juba for fear of being coerced into negotiations prematurely. Sayyed nevertheless considered that Abdulwahid shared the SPLM's "vision of change" and would come to Juba accordingly.

¶3. (SBU) There were differences of opinion among SPLM interlocutors regarding the participation of JEM's Khalil Ibrahim in forthcoming Juba talks. Sayyed assessed that despite the SPLM's and JEM's "ideological differences," both agreed on the marginalization of Darfur, and that would be the tie that binds them. Sayyed believed Khalil would come to the second round of Juba talks and that existing coalitions would welcome his participation. Minister of Health and prominent SPLM member in El Fasher Abdulshafie Eisa Mustafa expected the second Juba round to focus on unifying an agenda for eventual negotiations with the Government of Sudan (GoS), something he could never see Khalil agreeing to. "Khalil's own

agenda is his problem," Mustafa explained. "He is refusing to go to Juba because he wantst talk to the GoS separately, as JEM, not as a Darfurian." Mustafa predicted that even if SPLM leadership outreach succeeded in winning Khalil over (which Mustafa doubted), Khalil would not join a common rebel platform in Juba. Mustafa advised that "if you want to press Khalil, you have to start with [Chadian President] Deby." He acknowledged that Deby and Khalil were supporting each other but that it was Sudan Islamist leader Hasan al-Turabi, not Deby, who was directing Khalil to stay away from Juba talks, although Turabi denies this. (Note: Recent reporting indicates that there is a split between Khalil Ibrahim and President Deby, which these SPLM contacts were not aware of. End note).

AMBITIOUS SLA EXPECTATIONS

¶4. (SBU) Mustafa was cautiously optimistic that SLA/Unity would join a unified SLA during the course of a second Juba meeting, but only after "good talks" with SLA/Unity leader Sharif Harir. Mustafa did not think it would be difficult to engage Harir but worried that his hunger for power, like that of Abdulwahid, would ultimately undermine attempts to truly unify SLA, since Harir would be jockeying for a leadership position with Abdulwahid. URF leader Abdulshafie, on the other hand, was more malleable, according to Mustafa, and would accept a position as Deputy under Abdulwahid as part of a unified SLA. Mustafa said he had last spoken with Abdulshafie on March 28 and Abdulshafie had at that time indicated he was ready for peace talks with the GoS.

¶5. (SBU) FieldOff expressed doubt that SPLM would be able to unite the fair-weather friends Abdulwahid and Abdulshafie. Mustafa insisted that this unification would happen from the inside out: traditional structures and leaders, such as the Dimlig and the Maqdam, would be the ones to bring pressure to bear on both Abdulwahid and Abdulshafie to unite. FieldOff followed up with the

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El Fasher Dimlig after the SPLM discussion to ask about the viability of such a scheme; the Dimlig knew nothing of this tactic.

COMMENT

¶6. (SBU) Despite the lack of concrete details about the second round of Juba reunification talks, the tone of SPLM interlocutors in El Fasher indicates that SPLM will forge ahead with the conference. The SPLM office in El Fasher is still trying to get its sealegs - no real Secretary-General, very little outreach, despite what it claims to be a "huge" constituency in Darfur - which may account for its hush-hush attitude with regard to its strategy for Juba talks, as well as to its political affiliations and elections strategy (about which they would say nothing for fear of "losing constituencies"). The Minister of Health seems much more well-connected; he made a point of mentioning that he had attended secondary school with Sharif Harir, that his brother was currently with Abdulshafie, and that he knows Abdulwahid very well. Given the personalities involved in this reunification process, it would seem that high-level outreach to the SLA leaders would be more likely to provoke a positive response to Juba Part 2 than would outreach by traditional leaders, who typically serve only to convey Abdulwahid's messages. The anticipated visit of the overworked Abdel Aziz Helou to Darfur in the coming weeks could advance the SPLM's strategy both on rebel unification and elections in Darfur but there is much for them to do.

¶7. (U) Tripoli minimize considered.

FERNANDEZ